

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY | DRAFT MINUTES

Date: 9 April 2024

Time: 10.00 – 12.00

Venue: On-line

Present:

Cllr Mike Drew, Avon Local Councils Association
Cllr Liz Luder, Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils
Cllr Malcolm Watson, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Association of Local Councils
Cllr Paul Harvey, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils
Cllr Lindsey Dedden, Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils
Cllr Luke Trevaskis, Cheshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Stuart Roden, Cornwall Association of Local Councils
Cllr Bob Drew, Cornwall Association of Local Councils *
Cllr Allan Blakemore, County Durham Association of Local Councils
Cllr Mary Bradley, Cumbria Association of Local Councils
Cllr Ian Cowling, Devon Association of Local Councils
Cllr Keith Stevens, East Sussex Association of Local Councils
Cllr Peter Davey, Essex Association of Local Councils
Cllr Richard Page, Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town Councils
Cllr Loraine Rappé, Hampshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Marcus Allen, Herefordshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr John Graney, Isle of Wight Association of Local Councils *
Cllr Neville Hudson, Kent Association of Local Councils
Cllr Alan Neal, Lancashire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Geoff Hulland, Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Local Councils
Cllr Reece Harrington, Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Iain Hamilton, Merseyside Association of Local Councils
Cllr Mike Scott, Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils
Cllr David Francis, Northumberland Association of Local Councils
Cllr Heather Phillips, North Yorkshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Mick Baker, Nottinghamshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Kathrine Keats-Rohan, Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Ray Wickson, Shropshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Jenny Lawrence, Somerset Association of Local Councils
Cllr Duncan Wright, South Yorkshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Mark Valladares, Suffolk Association of Local Councils
Cllr Mike George, Surrey Association of Local Councils *
Cllr Peter Allison, West Yorkshire Association of Local Councils

Cllr John Scragg, Wiltshire Association of Local Councils
Cllr Sue Baxter, Worcestershire Association of Local Councils

*Substitute

Observer

Cllr Kellie Hinton, Henley on Thames Town Councils
Neil Wedge, Dorset Association of Parish and Town Council

NALC staff

Jonathan Owen, chief executive,
Steve Walker, head of finance and
administration,
Charlotte Eisenhart, head of member
services,
Claire FitzGerald, administration
manager,
Jane Moore, senior solicitor and legal
manager

Anders Hanson, member services
manager
Olivia Kane, administration officer,
Greg Henry, finance and administration
officer,
Chris Borg, policy manager
Silvia Nicole, administration officer
Beverly Brown, finance and
administration officer

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from:

Cllr Pat Ansell Staffordshire, Parish Councils Association

- Cllr Chris Howard, Surrey Association of Local Councils
- Cllr Bob Blezzard, Isle of Wight Association of Local Councils
- Cllr Douglas Denham St Pinnock, West Sussex Association of Local Councils
- Trevor Leggo, Chief Executive, West Sussex Association of Local Councils
- Cllr Keith Portress, East Riding and Northern Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils
- Tom Clay, County officer, East Riding and Northern Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils

Resolved: That the apologies be noted.

2. Welcome and introductions.

Deputies and new observers were introduced, and Cllr Geoff Hulland from Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Local Councils was welcomed to the meeting as their new representative. He has a background in accountancy and is vice-chair of the county association.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting and matters arising

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2023 were approved subject to a minor amendment to note Cllr Richard Page's apology which was not recorded. And a correction to the number of councils which had signed the civility and respect pledge (1478 at 9 April 2024).

A query was raised about NALC's membership of the National Joint Committee for Local Government. The chief executive confirmed that NALC had a seat but had not taken it up due to cost pressures. He would provide a fuller note.

In matters arising the chief executive reported that the Jo Cox Civility Commission had now reported and had picked up many NALC issues including those raised at the National Assembly's last meeting.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2023 as amended be approved.

4. Committee updates

It was reported that the new committees were making good progress on developing their work programmes to reflect the National Assembly's priorities set at its last meeting. These were agreed and are available on the NALC website.

The report identified some areas of the work programmes which may need additional resourcing and the chief executive confirmed that proposals would be drawn up for further consideration.

National Assembly also received written reports on the recent work of its standing committees and chairs flagged up the following issues.

- **Management board**

Management Board agreed the following special responsibility areas for its members:

- Mike Drew - website

- Loraine Rappé – communications
- Bob Blezzard – workforce
- Paul Harvey – AI and data
- Luke Trevaskis – Young people
- Sue Baxter – Diversity

The chair invited Assembly members to get in touch with these colleagues on management board to raise any matters relating to those areas identified which would then be fed through to the Board for consideration.

The Board will work with the county officers' forum on an event looking at "future proofing the sector" in 2025.

The Board appointed Charlotte Eisenhart as NALC's member director on the SAAA board, replacing Jonathan Owen.

- **Finance and scrutiny committee.**

The vice-chair (finance) spoke to the full financial report and apologised for its late circulation. The committee was reviewing the format of these reports for the new financial year. In addition, he stressed that:

- At the meeting of the Finance and Scrutiny Committee held on the 12th of March it was agreed that it should continue as a Finance and Scrutiny Committee. The scrutiny side of work will be chaired by Cllr Alan Neal.
- The expected outturn at year end is likely to be in line with the management accounts.
- He emphasized the importance of prompt or early payment of affiliation fees to support NALC's cash flow position early in the new financial year.

A request was made to provide a breakdown of costs and the audit trail of decision making for the NALC website project.

Assembly members noted the new rates for expenses as recommended by the committee. Updated forms will be distributed to all members. The approach to expenses may need to be reviewed in the future in the light of tax advice and to consider whether the level of payment was appropriate.

- **Policy committee**

The committee has responded to 9 consultations so far in 2024. The chair of the committee flagged up that a big issue for the sector would be the changing nature of the planning system as the emphasis in future might be on engaging with local and neighbourhood plans rather than individual planning applications.

Contributions from Assembly members concluded that planning was changing and needed to be kept under review and the sector briefed on changes and implications.

- **Larger Councils Committee**

The chair flagged up discussions around Martyn's Law and a useful contribution from the new chief executive of the SAAA. The committee would keep the question of co-options under review.

- **Smaller Councils committee**

The chair stressed that the committee was still getting to know each other and had agreed a work-programme. He requested further guidance from NALC on its content and direction. He personally queried the value of a micro-councils network that the committee had previously agreed to set up. National Assembly members had a range of views on this which would be considered further by the committee. The committee would also be looking at standing charges for utilities.

- **Improvement & Development Board**

It had agreed to establish four workstreams to progress initiatives around: civility and respect, intervention in councils at risk, workforce issues and sector data.

5. National Assembly work programme

2024/5	2025/6
9/7/24 community safety (face to face)	2/25 New February date Parliamentary reception (t.b.c) (face to face) Important to recognise that weather conditions can be inclement at this time of year.
8/10/24 General election preparation (including NALC manifesto) Assembly members questioned the timing of this and whether advice would be issued on local lobbying work.	8/4/25 AI and county officer thriving together event (t.b.c)

10/12/24 Workforce issues	8/7/25 Sector risk register
Development session on communications (t.b.c)	7/10/25 Membership survey/data project
	9/12/25 NALC elections

The Assembly agreed the following themes for discussions at its future meetings in addition to business-as-usual items. Some dates and content were dependent on availability of speakers and timing of the general election.

6. NALC strategic plan

The meeting revived a presentation from the chief executive on progressing NALC's strategic plan. The presentation can be accessed as appendix 1 at the end of these draft minutes.

Resolved: That the report be received.

7. The state of local government finance. Information exchange

Notes from each breakout room can be found as appendix 2 at the end of these draft minutes.

Resolved: That the notes be received

8. Workforce issues and strategy

The progress update was noted with a full session on this to be held on 10 December 2024

Resolved: That the report be received

9. NALC work programme and publications schedule

An update on NALC's work programme and publications schedule was received.

Resolved: That the report be received.

10. Assembly contact details

National Assembly members' contact details (where agreed) had now been circulated to enable members to contact each other. Members who have not submitted their consent forms are asked to do so if they are happy for their details to be shared.

Resolved: That the item be noted.

11. Date and time of next meeting.

To note the next meeting will be held on 9 July 2024 in person with the location to be confirmed. The meeting will run from 11:00 – 15:00.

Following meetings are scheduled for

Tuesday 08-Oct-24 via zoom

Tuesday 10-Dec-24 via zoom

Appendix 1

NALC STRATEGIC PLAN 2024 UPDATE FOR NATIONAL ASSEMBLY JONATHAN OWEN, CEO.

THE STATE OF THE SECTOR – SOME FACTS

- 10,000c councils, covering 91% of England's area, 35m people including 16m electors
- 100000c councillors, spending 14m hours supporting councils
- 3500c parish and town clerks
- Raising £783m through precepts (average £85.88), plus significant other income. Investing around £2bn in communities
- 5000 under £25k; 80 over £1m
- 300 new councils created in last decade in rural and urban areas increasing as move to unitary government accelerates
- 60 discretionary powers and many councils doing more than ever before as a result of devolution, cost of living crisis and recognizing role in big social issues.
- National Assembly has set better collection of data and member survey as priority.

NALC MISSION

“Local (parish and town) councils across the country will be the centre of community effort, the natural focus of public activity and service delivery.

Local councils give a democratic voice to communities in the deliberations of other agencies and work in partnership with them.

Vibrant, dynamic and effective local councils will help communities help themselves build strength and resilience and improve residents’ quality of life.”

Last updated by National Assembly in 2021, appears to continue relevance and chimes with a number of national objectives and political thinking.

STRATEGIC AIMS

- Strong national and county voices promoting the sector and our prospectus for ultra-localism
- Creating more local councils in England
- Supporting councils and councillors
- Effective national and county associations working together to deliver our mission
- Supported by modernizing the way NALC works through modern hybrid office and practices, implementation of CRM system and digital first approach via web-site to support net zero agenda.
- Mix of in-house and external services to support county associations and councils.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

- Prospectus for ultra-localism – a manifesto for building stronger communities across England
- Sets out the sector's offer to government
- Key statistics
- Four pillars (our asks)
 - Empower communities
 - Diverse funding
 - Strengthening local leadership
 - Building capacity and capability
- Forms basis of NALC Manifesto, produced by Policy Committee and used to influence politicians and informs lobbying work as General Election approaches and with new government (session at National Assembly 8 October).

GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT

- Governance and oversight by AGM, National Assembly appointed by county associations, office-holders and committees
- Remote meetings worked well and adopted approach of one physical meeting and three remote meetings
- Enables and facilitates more meetings, including informal ones and NALC National Networks (climate emergency, coastal communities, LGBT+ councillors, super councils, women councillors and young councillors.
- Piloting different meeting times for informal meetings and networks
- Committee work programmes supporting National Assembly priorities
- Wider scrutiny role being developed, possible member services committee to be considered 2025
- New micros-councils network
- Management Board special responsibilities (website

RELATIONS BETWEEN NALC AND COUNTY ASSOCIATIONS

- Close working and trust between county and national associations and regional level working critical to our success, as is a healthy relationship between county officers and NALC staff
- Positive regional working between county associations and challenges in some areas, including external competition
- Fortnightly meetings and attendance at events, motions to ensure our policy agenda up to date, involvement in committees, networks and on-line events
- Support for county officer development programmes
- Review of current two weekly meeting with county officers and thriving together event in 2025
- Working towards face to face event 2025
- Developing role of National Assembly members in improving communications.

OTHER STRATEGIC PARTNERS

- Society of Local Council Clerks
- Improvement and Development Board
- Local Government Association
- Lawyers in Local Government and Association of Democratic Services Officers
- One Voice Wales
- Smaller Authorities' Audit Appointments
- Rural Coalition and its partners
- Government departments especially cabinet office, DLUHC, DEFRA. Office for Place and Office for Local Government
- A range of think tanks, industry press (MJ and LGC) national media, academics etc.

CHALLENGES

For councils

- Supporting their developing role and encouraging them to fulfill potential
- Recruitment and retention – officers and councillors
- Raising understanding amongst key players as first tier of local government

For the national and county associations

- Raising understanding with councils and engaging them in our work
- Developing greater consistency of support across country
- Addressing competition and selling benefits
- Diversity
- Communications
- Delivering complex agenda with limited resources

How can you help?

Appendix 2

NOTES FROM BREAKOUT ROOMS – Assembly 9 April 2024

Exchange intelligence on the state of local government finance and the implications for our councils.

We asked groups to:

- A) exchange information on the situation as you see it locally
- B) identify what might be the implications for local parish and town councils
- C) what if anything should the county or national associations be doing.

Room 1

Liz Luder, Cllr A Neal, Lorraine Rappe, Heather Phillips, Jane Moore, Anders Hanson, Luke Trevaskis, Ian Cowling

A) exchange information on the situation as you see it locally

Cllr A Neal

Upset that some councils (Bolton) have lent money to those now in financial issues (Birmingham). Important to have finance scrutiny committees so there is proper oversight of how it's spent as councillors are legally responsible.

Heather

Can't imagine RFO would allow overspending to happen in a parish council. As a new unitary council, they have a dividend from that but money can be better spent by parishes using local knowledge. Cllrs need to take more responsibility for identifying grants and spending them correctly so they can't be clawed back if they aren't.

Lorraine

Hampshire is being prudent and using reserves but this will only last 2 years. There's a current consultation on what cuts may be needed but it's hard as 90% is mandatory spending on social care and school buses.

B) identify what might be the implications for local parish and town councils

Cllr A Neal

Council meets monthly as a finance sub-committee to monitor income and expenditure. His parish sold some property and invested money into CCLA and they now only spend the interest from this to keep the value of the asset.

Jane

Does separating role of clerk and RFO help make things better or worse? No strong views, but Cllr Neal felt best together. Lorraine said they've struggled to recruit a full-time clerk but with finances needing so much attention they were

looking at recruiting a separate finance role, but have now gone back to the original plan based on who was available.

Luke

Thinks some people stick too strictly to standard SCP rates and they need to look at what needs to be paid to get the right people. We shouldn't promote the idea of not needing previous experience as some people then struggle in the role and it undermines their credibility.

C) what if anything should the county or national associations be doing.

Luke

NALC should remind people that they need to do what works for them rather than sticking rigidly to SCP rates.

The Guardian article was good and being in more broadsheets raising the issue about how council funding is difficult, unique challenges for parishes, and raising the profile of the sector so people hear it from another source not just their own council/MP.

Cllr A Neal

More members need to take ownership rather than just relying on clerks to do everything. They debate with residents about the precept and how raising it a little would allow much better services.

Ian

We should be creating more EFFECTIVE councils rather than saying more councils. We should argue for the merger of the smallest councils. Encourage more delegation of funds from principal authorities as we can do it cheaper, perhaps even highway repairs.

Room 2

Attendees Mary Bradley, Mark Valladares, Chris Borg, Mick Baker, Beverley Brown (for part), Allan Blakemore and Malcolm Watson

A) exchange information on the situation as you see it locally

- In Suffolk there has been a Band D average per property rise of 5.5% for FY 24-25. This is due to slightly higher expenditure. Around 60% of costs for Suffolk local councils tends to be on staffing.
- In Notts. Nottingham City Council has gone apparently into administration.
- In Cambridgeshire some precepts have doubled, some have not increased their precepts at all. Average precept increase there around 6.5%.
- In Durham some unitary funding has been distributed around parishes. However, in the North-East some local councils have been told if they have received S106 monies for their areas they may not use CIL. Bids are strenuous. Cutbacks have affected services.
- In Cumbria the creation of 2 unitaries has meant more service delegation to parishes. Cumberland has seen assets being sold off, with its parishes raising their precepts.

B) identify what might be the implications for local parish and town councils

- Larger councils have a central hub and spoke role in devolution to play. Hinterland smaller councils can benefit if town councils offer devolved services, but smaller councils should also contribute financially.
- Battery Energy Storage Sites (BESS) issue is now national policy following a recent YLCA motion adopted by PC. This is emerging as a national issue (see Lancashire, S. Yorks, Notts.).
- Important local councils have access to direct funding as social tariffs have bypassed them, clerk training costs money.
- Town councils have many common issues and a key role in town centre management.

C) what if anything should the county or national associations be doing.

- NALC financial resilience work is crucial.
- NALC should continue its crucial work on direct funding for all local councils.

Room 3

Charlottes notes

A) exchange information on the situation as you see it locally

B) identify what might be the implications for local parish and town councils

- Wilts - 2 principles in CALC area. Wiltshire finances more sound than many. Johns council is Chippenham which has taken on a lot of extra services without extra financial support which has led to extra precept increase. No real pushback from electorate. This year modest precept increase helped by CIL from new housing. And going to referendum on neighborhood plan which will increase CIL even more
- IWALC - little parish - 4 pubs and one shop. Island is unique - not understood by national politicians ie not recognised as a physical island which has implications. Eg costs more to run services on an island. Taking over toilets nearly ruined the council due to business rates - now not on public toilets so that has made big difference. Housing is short. Airbnb - negative views. People living in the woods due to lack of affordable housing
- Dorset - moving to unitary in 2019 helped avoid some of the worst of the crisis. 'Managing for the time being'. Twin hatted councillors on her parish means she feels more informed by getting their perspective. Big new housing development in the parish but not enough development eg supermarket/infrastructure. Took on some services eg toilets, community centre, car park. Main problems in north of the county - past history of not rising precept which hit hard when crisis hit.
- Cornwall - Unitary - financial position is that the county is still solvent, but rapidly moving to not funding non statutory services, eg toilets. TPCs arms twisted to take on the services dropped by the unitary. Example of swimming pool and toilets. Very expensive to run. Bigger towns can accommodate the costs but many cannot. Own parish mix of rural, urban and industrial. Offered to take on parks for £1 - obviously a catch - lack of past investment meant the assets offered needed a lot of investment to get to standard even though the unitary claimed they were fine. Themes - pressure to take on services. Variability of councils ability/desire to take them on

- Merseyside - regional mayor plus borough councils and Liverpool city in CALC area. There are hidden cost pressures that don't get discussed. Own larger town council has a community centre, parks, and a number of other assets/services. Additional costs come from under the radar eg primary 'acadamisation' has affected various IT/infrastructure provision (due to how local infrastructure works) and that means £25,000 addition to ICT costs just for community centres - and this happened in financial year. Successful levelling up bid for town centre but the town council wasn't consulted on the bid put in from the borough council. But the town council will have to pay for the (substantial) upkeep and maintenance costs to the improvements funded by the LU fund. Difficulty of explaining to residents and them seeing their council tax bills going up and not understanding why.

C) what if anything should the county or national associations be doing.

Northumberland - Interesting to see this group was all unitaries and would be interesting to see how different in three tier areas. Plus many of us longer standing unitaries. Northumberland reorganisation took place 2009 (?) so that adjustment of services across county/tpcs has been going on a long time and so less urgent/fast. LGIU session at management board showed a 'horrendous' national situation. But own county seemed to have things under control. Should we be developing a better understanding at NALC of the situation area by area? How do councils and counties get a true picture?

Merseyside - recently visited DALC larger councils meeting - NALC could produce best practice guides to devolution of services. Even if tips / potholes to avoid. Eg watch out being offered assets at £1 but what are the long run maintenance costs? Northumberland - how get early warning from principle councils on their situation and services to be devolved?

Room 4

Attendees, Ray Wickson, Peter Davey. Sue Baxter, Mike Drew, Mike George, Luke Trevaskis & Claire FitzGerald

A) exchange information on the situation as you see it locally

B) identify what might be the implications for local parish and town councils

- Government passes responsibility for service provision down to parish councils especially when it comes to provision of housing for immigrants
- Some councils have noted an increased need for social care provision
- Uncertainty moving forward with local and general election due/state of flux
- LGA have produced a white paper with their asks of new government, is NALC doing same?
- Central government does not trust local government and vice versa.
- No plan to withdraw service ie Woking
- Some parish councils bordering larger metropolitan area particularly Birmingham expect a fall out from their problems such as flytipping and homelessness
- Health and social care is not funded in a sensible nor consistent way
- We used to get a share of the business rate.

C) what if anything should the county or national associations be doing.

- We need to have our own ideas as a sector and be clear about what we can take on.
- Need to build capacity in the sector

Room 5

Attendees, Marcus Allen, Geoff Hulland, Katherine Keats-Rohan, Jenny Lawrence, Kellie Hinton

Question 1 and 2

One new unitary, despite the argument that setting up a new council would save money, was in financial difficulty. It was looking to parish councils to help including developing volunteers to fix roads etc. It had also sought interest in appointing highways rangers at £50k per year. Larger local councils found it easier to cope than smaller parishes because of their precept size and other revenue.

One commented that financial challenge was having knock-on effect on recruiting councillors. His parish council had a diverse membership but many others found it difficult to get people to stand for election. His parish council could cope with increased expenditure but others were beginning to consider precept increases.

The impact of principal councils focussing on childrens' services and adult care meant they had little to support other work including highway repairs or monitoring officers.

The position in another county was very variable although the county council had taken 11 hours to agree a budget. The county chief executive at a recent meeting with the county association had been honest in his appraisal of the problem faced and that many services would only continue with community, parish or volunteer help. There were many good parish and town councils in that county which were doing a lot, but some were poorly led, held few elections, lacked diversity and did little. They detected a greater willingness amongst some to increase precepts.

Another contributor stressed her council was able to pick up lost services and support neighbouring parishes with things like bus services. They put this down to the diversity of their council. People were concerned about false economies (eg unprofessionally filled potholes) and double taxation. They were aware on increasingly visible signs of social breakdown eg homelessness which parish councils might need advice on.

Question 3

A number of areas for support from NALC/county associations were mentioned:

- Persuade the sector and towns in particular to see themselves as leading locally.
- A toolkit to help smaller councils do that (one county association is working something up)
- Local councils are often too insular and need to work together
- Support for increasing volunteers and candidates for elections

- Advice on role in homelessness and other signs of social breakdown